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## The Dreamers Awake: Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art

J. V. S Megaw

Ruth Megaw

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### Abstract

A mere twenty years ago most people thought of contemporary Australian Aboriginal arts and crafts as primarily the production of bark paintings and boomerangs, mostly for the tourist trade, or as the European-style watercolour landscapes of the Aranda artists from the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission east of Alice Springs, of whom the best-known was Albert Namatjira (1902-1959). Collecting Western institutions were generally museums whose interest was primarily in the ethnographic aspects of the art. Since then there have been some remarkable developments in both quantity and range, at a rate which makes any description or analysis likely to be out of date as soon as it is written. In this, Australia's Bicentennial year, Aboriginal art has become one of the prime ways of asserting the continued and distinct identity of Fourth World people where, unlike the Third World, the colonizers never went home.

# The Dreamers Awake: Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art

A mere twenty years ago most people thought of contemporary Australian Aboriginal arts and crafts as primarily the production of bark paintings and boomerangs, mostly for the tourist trade, or as the European-style water-colour landscapes of the Aranda artists from the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission east of Alice Springs, of whom the best-known was Albert Namatjira (1902-1959). Collecting Western institutions were generally museums whose interest was primarily in the ethnographic aspects of the art. Since then there have been some remarkable developments in both quantity and range, at a rate which makes any description or analysis likely to be out of date as soon as it is written. In this, Australia's Bicentennial year, Aboriginal art has become one of the prime ways of asserting the continued and distinct identity of Fourth World people where, unlike the Third World, the colonizers never went home.

In 1988 Aboriginal art also includes the acrylic paintings of an increasing number of communities in Central Australia, fine pottery and textiles and the paintings and prints of a range of individual artists, often city-dwellers. At the 1988 Adelaide Festival one of no less than eight exhibitions devoted to contemporary Aboriginal art displayed prints of political protest by both white and Aboriginal artists under the title of *Right Here, Right Now*; without inside knowledge it was impossible to tell which graphics were by whites and which by Aboriginals. In 1979, the Flinders University of South Australia's Art Museum began consciously collecting what, a number of years ago, Nelson Graburn (1976; 1982) first referred to as 'transitional' art, but, with a few honourable exceptions, major art institutions such as the Australian National Gallery, the Art Gallery of South Australia and other State galleries only began buying Aboriginal art, especially that from central Australia, to any significant degree around 1984. Commercial 'fine art' galleries – mostly run by non-Aborigines – have also begun to sell Aboriginal art at ever-increasing prices, and major overseas exhibitions have been held in the

United States and Europe. Aboriginal art has thus, in some forms, become recognized in the white art world as 'High Art'. With these developments have come problems of increasing economic dependence on a white-controlled art market where profits often go to the dealers, not the artists, where the values by which the work is judged may be quite different from those of the artists themselves, and where over-production and competition may in the long run affect prices and thus livelihoods, a problem not unknown to western artists also. In many central Australian communities, the income from art sales is now often the only money coming in from other than governmental sources.

## TRANSITIONAL ART

Before the arrival of Europeans, Aboriginal art was part of a complicated network of social relationships, largely ceremonial in character and concerned with connections with land and mythological origins. It was not made for outsiders and, in a precommercial society, it had no monetary value. Much of twentieth-century aboriginal art is 'transitional' in a number of ways. It is the art of people overwhelmed by an alien culture within which they have had to learn to live in order to survive, since the whites have made few adjustments. It has also accepted and used new media of expression; painting in acrylic on board or canvas has joined ground or body painting in the central Australian communities, prints and posters are widely used as are non-traditional colours. The value of the work is now more complex in monetary, aesthetic, social and economic terms and to different categories of people. Finally, many white teachers, missionaries, anthropologists and painters have been influential in the emergence of non-traditional forms of Aboriginal art, as, since the mid-1970s, have the, once again mostly white, art advisors paid for by the Federally funded Aboriginal Arts Board and appointed by aboriginal communities. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they have influenced Aboriginal artistic expression in both form and content (Anderson and Dussart 1988).

Art advisors provide art materials, buy the finished products according to their own criteria of what is technically competent and saleable, and arrange the exhibition and sale of items to the outside world. Many of these people have hoped, sometimes idealistically, sometimes paternalistically, to improve

the economic self-sufficiency of Aborigines, and enhance their status in a white man's world, which, however ambiguously, recognises the artist as having some role. Art production provides a form of income which allows Aborigines to remain outside the white world of employment, and thus helps the survival of distinct Aboriginal communities and identity. The system of funding and marketing since the 1970s has also encouraged increasing numbers of communities to take up art production. The combination of government funding and the provision to artists of cash before outside sale, which could otherwise be subject to market vagaries, has meant steady if not spectacular income for some communities, and encouraged emulation by others. The Government has, however, recently suggested that art advisors should not be publicly funded, but paid for by the communities out of their profits. The question of marketing has been more difficult. In recent years successive attempts at setting up Aboriginal-run if publicly-funded bodies for the support of both outback and urban artists and for the marketing of their works have foundered. One such body is Aboriginal Arts Australia, trading as Inada Holdings and funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, with an all-Aboriginal Board. In 1987, 16 communities broke away to form the Association of Northern and Central Aboriginal Artists, with its own *ANCAA* Newsletter. Art advisers are paid for by the Aboriginal Arts Board under the Federal Department of Arts, and they and their artists want more control of marketing for artists. So far the major effect of this breakaway has been greater access to the art of the communities for private galleries and collectors, but *ANCAA* itself is providing a quite remarkable forum for the exchange of news and views between artists and communities (Isaacs 1987).

For many of the artists themselves, the art provides a link to the Dreamtime past of their ancestors and, even more specifically, shows their connection with the land which many are now demanding back from their white conquerors. This poses a problem for those Aboriginal artists who no longer have distinct tribal or land affiliations, as is often the case in the more densely populated regions of south and eastern Australia. But, whatever the content and continuity of the dreamings, the forms they now take are often commercially motivated, and the production of these forms would almost certainly cease if whites stopped buying them (Anderson and Dussart 1988).

## EARLIER DEVELOPMENTS

As in Africa or North America, direct and indirect European influence on aboriginal visual arts has a long history. It is evident in the c. 1860-1901 narrative pen-and-ink drawings of Tommy McRae, an Aborigine of the Upper Murray River, and of his contemporary William Barak who lived at the Aboriginal reserve of Coranderrk near Melbourne. In the centre of Australia in the 1930s Aranda children on the Finke River Lutheran Mission at Hermannsburg were producing drawings in a 'European' manner under the influence of Arthur Much and Frances Derham. In the 1940s lively genre pictures were being executed at the Carrolup Aboriginal School in Western Australia – today an Aboriginal controlled community attempting with white aid to produce its own new forms of art and crafts.

In the 1930s Albert Namatjira developed the foundations of the still continuing Hermannsburg school of Aranda water-colourists under the tutelage of the Victorian artist Rex Battarbee. Some of the current output of such work can be dismissed as tourist *kitsch*, but it too emphasizes the artists' connection with the land. After decades of disdain by white art critics, Namatjira's work has recently been more sympathetically re-assessed (Maughan and Megaw 1986,49-52; Amadio 1986), and a major exhibition on the Hermannsburg artists is planned for 1989.

## BARK PAINTING

Though early white explorers report bark paintings in southern Australia, their production is now confined to the north. The pioneering anthropologist Baldwin Spencer and a local land-owner Paddy Cahill commissioned some for the National Museum of Victoria in 1911-12. From the late 1920s regular production for sale was actively sponsored by missionaries in north-eastern Arnhem Land, notably the Reverend Wilbur Chaseling at Yirrkala. The aims were economic self-sufficiency and the reinforcing of Aboriginal identity. Barks are now produced by Tiwi men and women on Bathurst and Melville Islands, in the Kimberley region of Western Australian and above all in Arnhem Land. Bark painting was normally transient before this development and the designs were secret-sacred and in many areas not available to women. The production of

barks for sale has encouraged techniques to preserve both bark and pigments. It has also meant that many of the barks for sale to whites used new, non-secret designs in which the artists were willing to indulge the white taste for more representative imagery. This new domain of bark painting exists alongside the continued use of designs for ritual purposes (Berndt, Berndt and Stanton 1982, 51-68). Because of this women are also beginning to paint barks, for example at Yirrkala, using these new domains or portrayals of their everyday life or even Christian iconography as subject matter (Maughan and Megaw 1986, 19-29). Most recently the all-pervading use of acrylic paints has extended even to the 'translation' of bark-painting subjects onto canvas.

## TEXTILES, POTTERY SCULPTURE AND BASKETRY

In the north-west desert regions of South Australia dedicated white teachers introduced a whole range of new techniques to the women of the Pitjantjatjara and Yunkuntjatjara communities of the far north-east of South Australia. From 1954, largely under the guidance of Winifred Hilliard at Ernabella, spinning and rug-weaving was introduced but gave way to the less labour-intensive batik printing for fashion fabrics from about 1971 (Hilliard 1985). Anmatyerre/Aliawarra women at Utopia (Green 1981) and Pitjantjatjara and Yunkuntjatjara women at Indulkana also turned to batik. Skills borrowed from Indonesian crafts-workers were used to produce a whole range of swirling foliate designs which have recently been translated by these and a number of other communities into silkscreen or lino prints. Women in the far west of Australia and at Yuendumu in the Centre as well as much further north on Bathurst Island and at Yirrkala have also taken up batik printing. In other parts of Arnhem Land where men traditionally own the clan designs used in bark painting, women have till recently been confined to the weaving of bags, baskets and mats.

While the Tiwi (men and women) of Bathurst and Melville Islands continue to carve and paint their funerary carved *pukumani* poles as part of their own ceremonial life, they are also now producing them for sale as well as other carvings of birds and mythical beings. In a move which Aboriginal art advisor John Mundine sees as a quiet protest for the Bicentennial, he has persuaded the Australian National Gallery to commission an exhibition of

200 *pukumani* poles, which their Aboriginal creators regard as a proper commemoration of 200 years of white occupation. Figures like those on the carvings are being repeated as motifs in the highly successful Bima Wear fabric printing of the Tiwi Designs cooperative. Woodblock and silkscreen printing was begun in 1969 under the supervision of Madeline Clear as a partnership between two young Tiwi, Bede Tungutalum and Giovanni Tipungwuti. The cooperative now employs many other Tiwi on a full-time basis. The use of acrylic and canvas is also beginning, as elsewhere in northern Australia, in an attempt to repeat the success of the contemporary painters of the so-called 'Papunya school' of the Centre.

Other fabric production includes that of Jumbana Designs. This company uses the designs of John Moriarty, originally of the Yanula/Borrooloola group, but, like so many other young Aborigines, removed early from his home environment and now a high-level public servant in Adelaide. The most aggressive recent marketing of fabric designs is that of the company formed to promote the designs and prints of Jimmy Pike. Jimmy was born into a nomadic group of Walmadjari in the Great Sandy Desert of Western Australia, but learned to paint in Fremantle gaol, and has achieved recent major recognition as an artist (Lowe 1987).

Some of the fabrics, like some of the craft pottery now produced by various Aboriginal communities, including the Tiwi, have met with considerable white sales resistance for not looking 'Aboriginal' enough. Almost unique in gaining wide recognition and in achieving a freedom of expression in the non-traditional medium of ceramics is the work of Thancoupie (b. 1937) from Weipa on Cape York in northern Queensland, but trained in Sydney. Thancoupie's small-scale pieces and major murals 'symbolise the relationship between the physical and spiritual lives of Aboriginal people' (Thancoupie, quoted in Isaacs 1982, p. 60).

## CENTRAL AND WESTERN DESERT PAINTING

The acrylic paintings of the various communities of the Western and Central Desert region represent the most innovative and – again in Western terms – most successful contemporary art movement in Aboriginal Australia. They are based on the traditional iconography of largely curvilinear motifs which are still traditionally employed in ground painting and ritual



body-painting, and on sacred objects such as the flat oval stone or wooden *tjuringa* and ground designs, as well as in less 'restricted' forms on shields, spears, carrying dishes and boomerangs and in the illustrating of stories told to children. The translation into the modern, saleable, medium of paint, canvas and artist's board came about in 1971 at the instigation of a young art teacher, Geoff Bardon, then working at the government-established Papunya settlement west of Alice Springs (Bardon 1979; Kimber 1986).

In general such paintings are a formalized mapping of a particular geographical location associated with a specific mythological happening or individual. The word used for the paintings, *tjukurrpa*, denotes at one and the same time 'story' and the Dreamtime. The rights to stories depend on gender, descent, age, initiation and status. Only those with rights in them may reproduce them or, as is sometimes the case, authorize their reproduction by others.

In the early days of the movement many Papunya paintings incorporated clearly recognizable figures and even secret/sacred objects, but with the passing of time there has been an increasing abstraction of motifs, a recodifying which renders impossible precise interpretation by the uninitiated. With the resettlement by the Pintupi in 1981 westwards out of the artificially established centre of Papunya into their old tribal areas centred on Kintore, the overtly complex narrative symbolism of the older artists has given way to a consciously 'conservative' abstraction. With certain artists this has extended to the use of a restricted palette which corresponds to the traditional earth colours of body- and ground painting. Others, especially the newer artists – who now include a significant number of women – continue to exploit the total chromatic freedom allowed by the use of the modern acrylic medium (Brody 1985; Maughan 1986; Maughan and Megaw 1986, 39-49; Maughan 1987).

The success not only in Australia but also on the international art market of the work of such male artists as Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (Anmatyerre/Aranda), Charlie Tjaruru Tjungarrayi (Pintupi) (Crocker 1987) or of the younger generation, Michael Nelson Tjakamarra (Warlpiri) (who has worked closely with the Sydney former conceptual artist Tim Johnson – Topliss 1988) has led to an escalation of prices. In 1971 Papunya paintings sold for \$A30-40; now they frequently fetch several thousand. The creation of a 'star' system has put strains on communities which are

communally-minded and where the paintings are often worked on by several people, though only one may 'own' the story.

Recognition has also encouraged the establishment of other centres of production, for example in the Warlpiri community at Yuendumu west of Papunya where the painting of large-scale canvases has gone hand in hand with the introduction of other ways of maintaining traditional beliefs and values such as programmes made for Aboriginal-controlled satellite television (Michaels 1987). At Yuendumu, it was the women who began painting and they still form seventy per cent of the painters. This may well have been because both the white anthropologists and teachers who encouraged the new art form were themselves women, while at Papunya, Geoffrey Bardon, as a male, found relations with the older men easier in a strictly gender-defined society. Yuendumu painting to date uses a wider range of colours than that from Papunya and Kintore (Anderson 1988), though at the latter most recently one can detect a return to the old 'free' style both by the few surviving older founder members of the movement as well as those new to painting. It has also been suggested that many of the women's stories, particularly those connected with food-gathering or 'bush tucker' are not secret, and therefore some men are also now painting such women's dreamings (Dimmock 1987).

As one of the most recent communities to follow this trend of painting in acrylic on canvas or board, the Warlpiri and Anmatyerre of Mount Allen, the elders of the community took a conscious decision to allow all members, men, women and children to paint, and, from the western viewpoint, some of the technically most accomplished paintings have been by girls as young as twelve, though for Aborigines the stories to which such children are entitled are few. In Western Australia, the Balgo community has turned to acrylic painting for external sale, while other groups have continued to prefer to use ochres on board or canvas, and have themselves developed ways of improving the adhesion of the ochres (Dimmock, 1987,13).

## INDIVIDUAL PAINTERS AND PRINT AND POSTER MAKERS

Though many Aborigines object to the use of the term 'urban' – an alternative Aboriginal term, 'Koori', is preferred in the south-east – 'urban' does serve to describe the current residence of many Aboriginal artists

outside the communities of Central or Northern Australia. Many of these are working exclusively in non-traditional media. They are more likely to work without community support and to have to deal more directly with white society and the white art world.

Banduk Marika was born in 1954 on Yirrkala Mission in north-east Arnhem Land, but left in her mid-teens and until late 1987, when she became responsible for the new Buku-Larrngay Arts Museum at Yirrkala, spent most of her time in Sydney. She is the daughter of one famous Yolngu bark painter, Mawalan, and sister of another, recently deceased. Banduk concentrates mostly on lino-cuts, but uses images such as the heron which are her traditional property, in a style which recalls that of Yirrkala barks, while insisting on the essentially personal nature of her work. She expressly eschews contemporary or 'political' subject-matter.

Her perceptions of her role as an Aboriginal artist are markedly different for example from those of Trevor Nickolls, (b. 1949 in Port Adelaide and art school trained), and Byron Pickett (b. 1955), originally from the wheatbelt township of Quairading, Western Australia. Trevor Nickolls, who has experimented as much as any other Aboriginal artist in style and subject-matter, in his most recent work consciously uses the dotting technique and restricted symbolism of the traditional art forms of the Centre; works with titles such as *Machine time and Dreamtime* contrast with representations of Manly Point in Sydney Harbour or simple outback landscapes with rocks. His work was also part of the touring Bicentenary Exhibition as was the work of other Aboriginal artists. Nickolls, like many other Aborigines caught between two cultures, regards his work as a personal search for his roots; he has commented, 'I want to be known simply as Trevor Nickolls the painter. I find it restricting to be labelled an Aboriginal painter' (Beier 1985). In this he echoes both those 'traditional' bark painters who introduce themselves to ignorant outsiders as 'artist-fellers' and the striving of Albert Namatjira to find recognition both for his art and his people when he stated his wish 'to paint like a white man'.

Byron Pickett, who in a few years has become one of the most accomplished artists working in screen-printing, regards his work as 'a visual expression of how Aboriginal heritage survives the power of time'. His prints combine photographic images of his own experiences with traditional

symbols and written commentary, and are intended to show 'the different worlds of traditional Aborigines and Western culture'.

The commercial success of the 'ethnographic fine arts' has heightened the search for identity by urban-based artists, many of whom have no formal tribal links with the more traditional cultures of the Centre and the 'Top End'. Some have attempted to find their own tribal roots, others have concentrated on the link of Aborigines and land, while some such as Sally Morgan (b. 1951, living in Perth) or Robert Campbell Jnr (b. 1944, Kempsey, NSW) have used the dotting or hatching techniques of traditional art to tell their own autobiographies or make political statements. There have been conscious borrowings by the 'Koori' artists of Sydney and Melbourne – Gordon Syron, Lin Onus (b. 1948), Jeffrey Samuels, Raymond Meeks (b. 1957) and Fiona Foley (b. 1964); Aboriginal photographers and film makers are also gaining recognition such as Polly Sumner in Adelaide and Tracey Moffatt (b. Brisbane 1960) in Sydney (Johnson 1984; Maughan and Megaw 1986, pp. 63-75; Johnson 1987; Samuels and Watson 1987).

In addition there has been what can be regarded as the cultural appropriation or colonization of Aboriginal imagery by non-Aboriginal artists. This process, which can be traced back to the work of the modernist painter and potter Margaret Preston in the mid 1920s, was continued in the 1940s by the Antipodean school headed by Sidney Nolan and the Boyds and most recently in differing ways by Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers. Such stylistic borrowings parallel the inspiration obtained by the cubists and surrealists from the study of African and North American art. However reconciliatory the intention of such art, it can be seen as a form of cultural appropriation by members of a dominant culture from a subordinated one (Maughan and Megaw 1986, 15-16; Davila 1987).

Finally, the increasing diversity and energy of Aboriginal art in Australia is both exciting and alarming. Exciting, because so many Aborigines are innovative and talented and adaptable artists. Alarming, not for the 'traditionalist' or human zoo approach which deplores any change in Aboriginal society or culture, but because their economic future is increasingly bound up with outside economic forces of the art market, over which, unlike the production of art, the artists have little control. But it is also confirmation of the vitality and adaptability of Aboriginal society.

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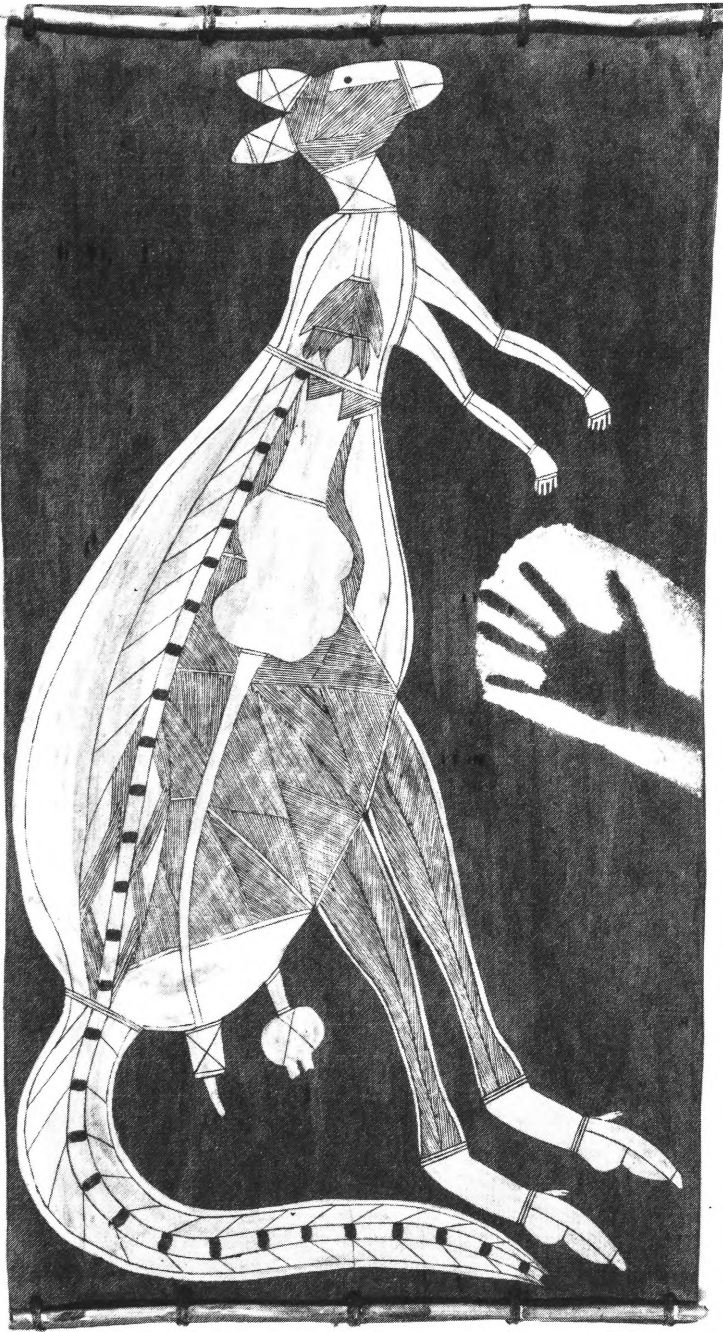


2. Products of the Hermannsburg 'school'. Above: Ewald Namatjira (Aranda; youngest son of Albert Namatjira) Untitled (272 x 375 mm). Watercolour on artist's board (collection Flinders University Art Museum). Below: Albert Namatjira (Aranda) Landscape on *Woomera* (spear thrower). Earlier than 1944. *Woomera* 545 x 140 mm (Private collection).

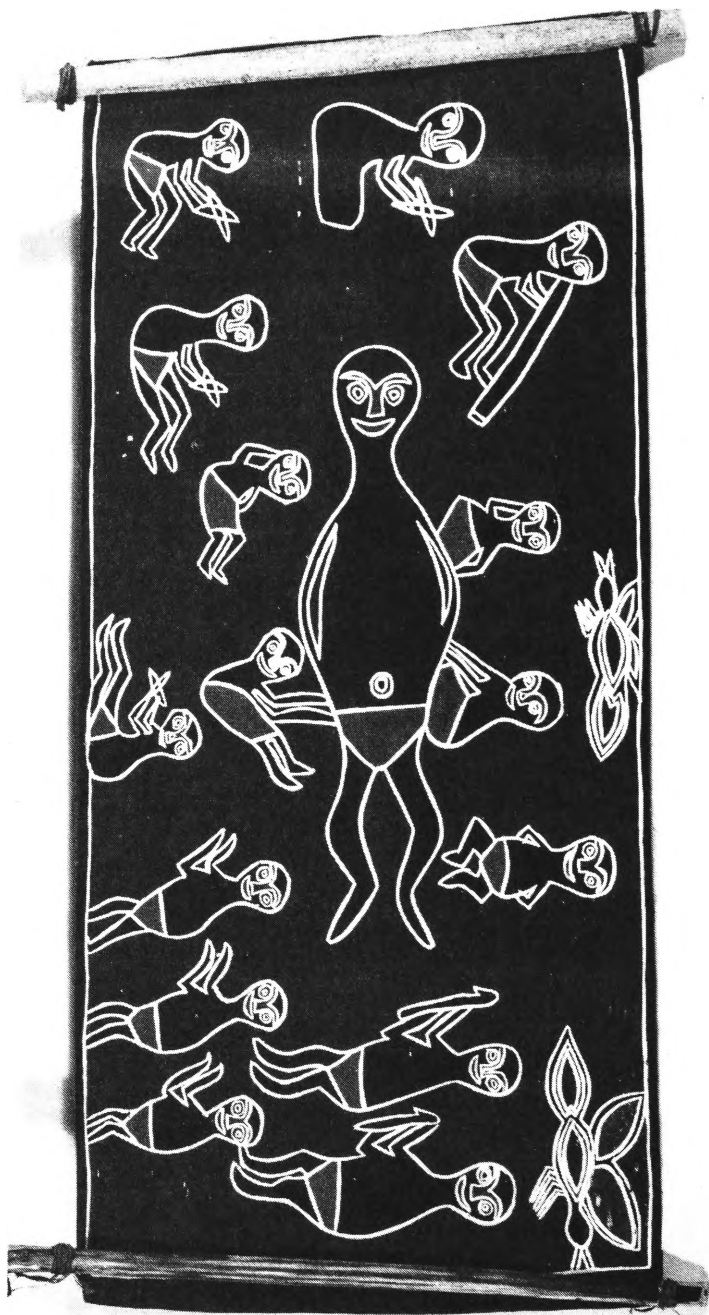


3. David Malangi (Urgiganjdjar language; Ramagingin, Northern Territory) during a period as Artist-in-Residence at flinders University of South Australia in 1982 with one of his bark paintings – the design of which was, without authorisation, incorporated in the Australian dollar bill, now no longer in use.

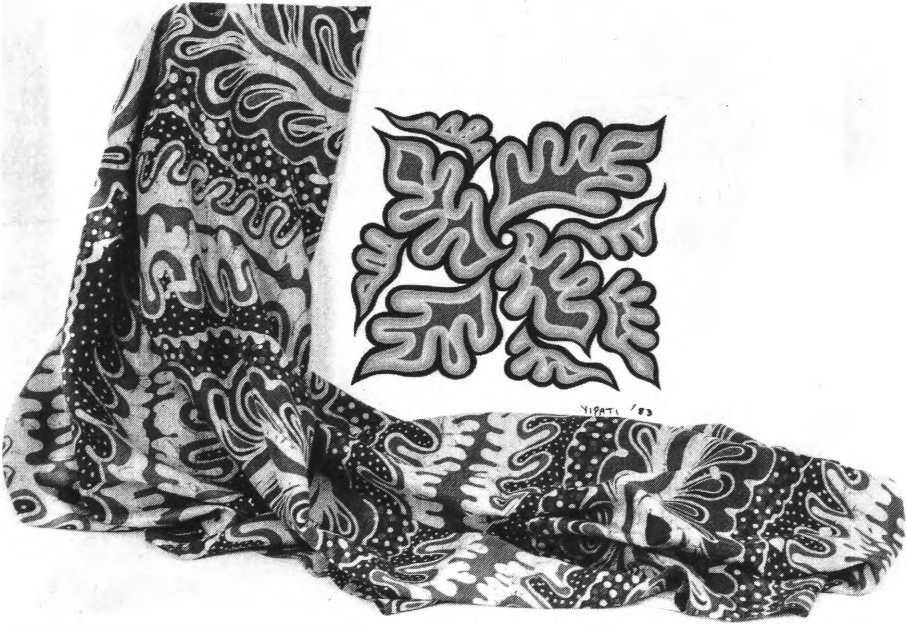




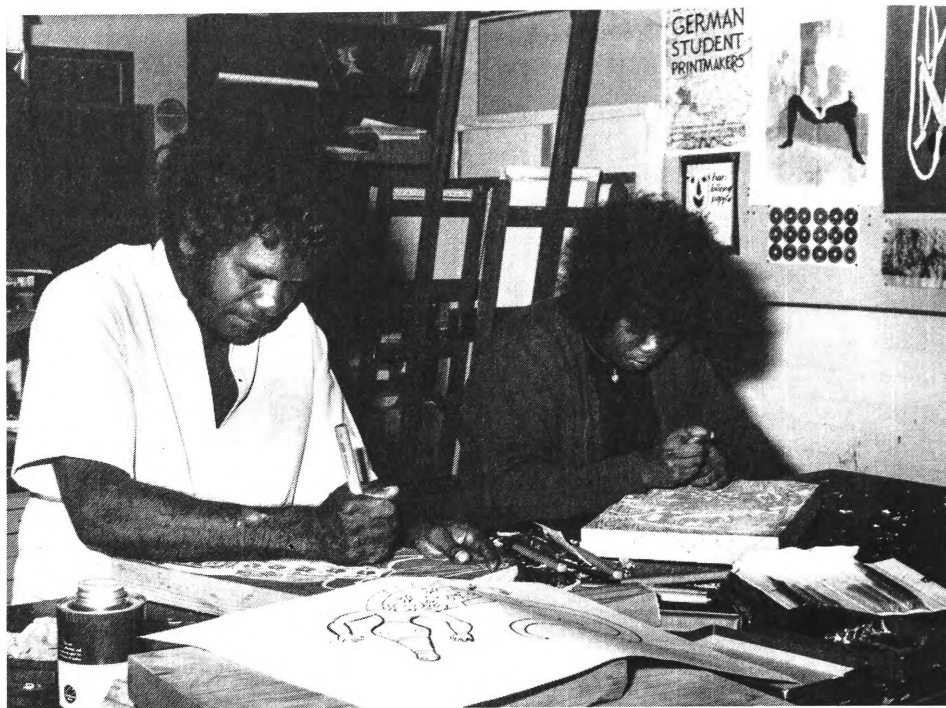
4. Thompson Ulidjirri (Gunwinggu language; Oenpelli, Northern Territory) Kandarik. Pre-1979. Red and white ochres on bark painting in X-ray technique of a male kangaroo. 1000 x 530 mm (collection Flinders University Art Museum).



5. Marrngula Munungurr (Balamumu language; Wandawuy near Yirrkala, Northern Territory). Funeral Ceremony. August 1983. 358 x 810 mm. This is one of a series of paintings of everyday life. To the left are musicians with didjeridu and clap sticks, while at bottom right three women dance the spirit dance (collection Flinders University Art Museum).



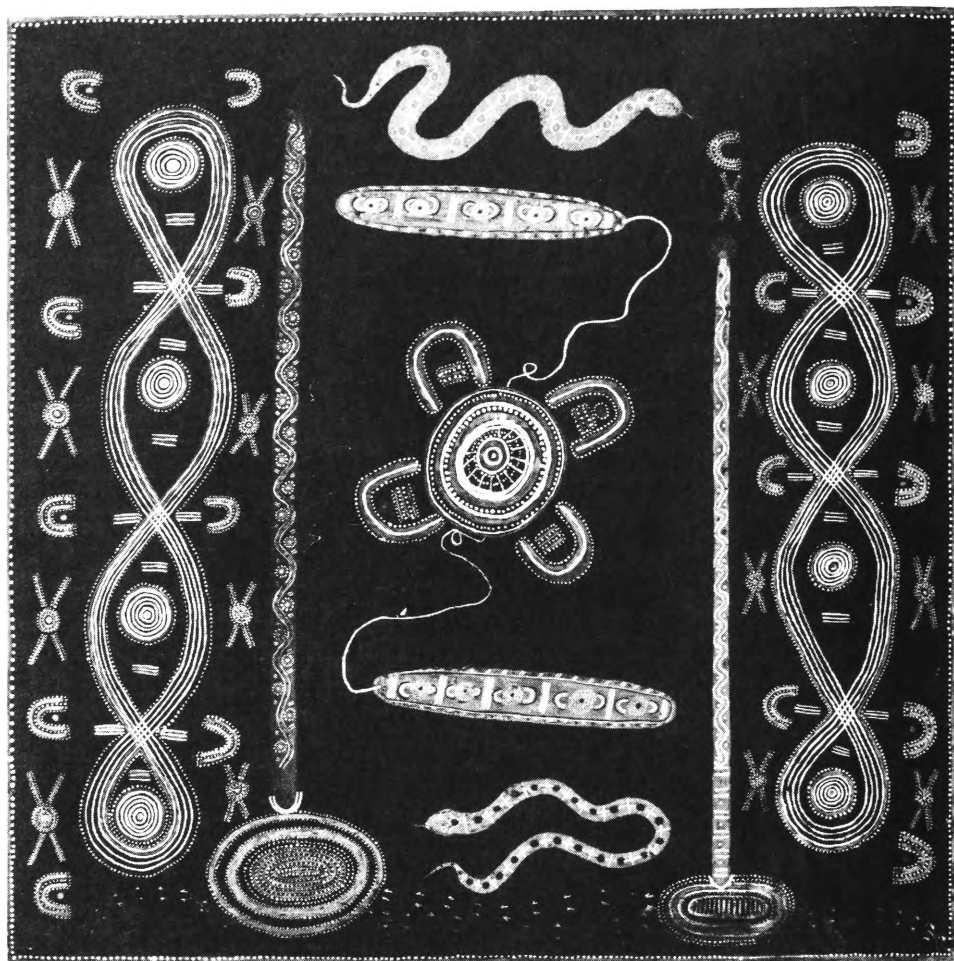
6. Work of Pitjantjatjara women working at Ernabella, South Australia. Left: Tjinkuma : Batik on silk 1984. 2340 x 940 mm. Right: Yipati : Untitled silkscreen on paper. Print 250 x 280 mm. (collection Flinders University Art Museum).



7. Bede and Francine Tungutalum (Tiwi language; Bathurst Island, Northern Territory) working on lino-cuts during their period as artists-in-residence at Flinders University in 1980.

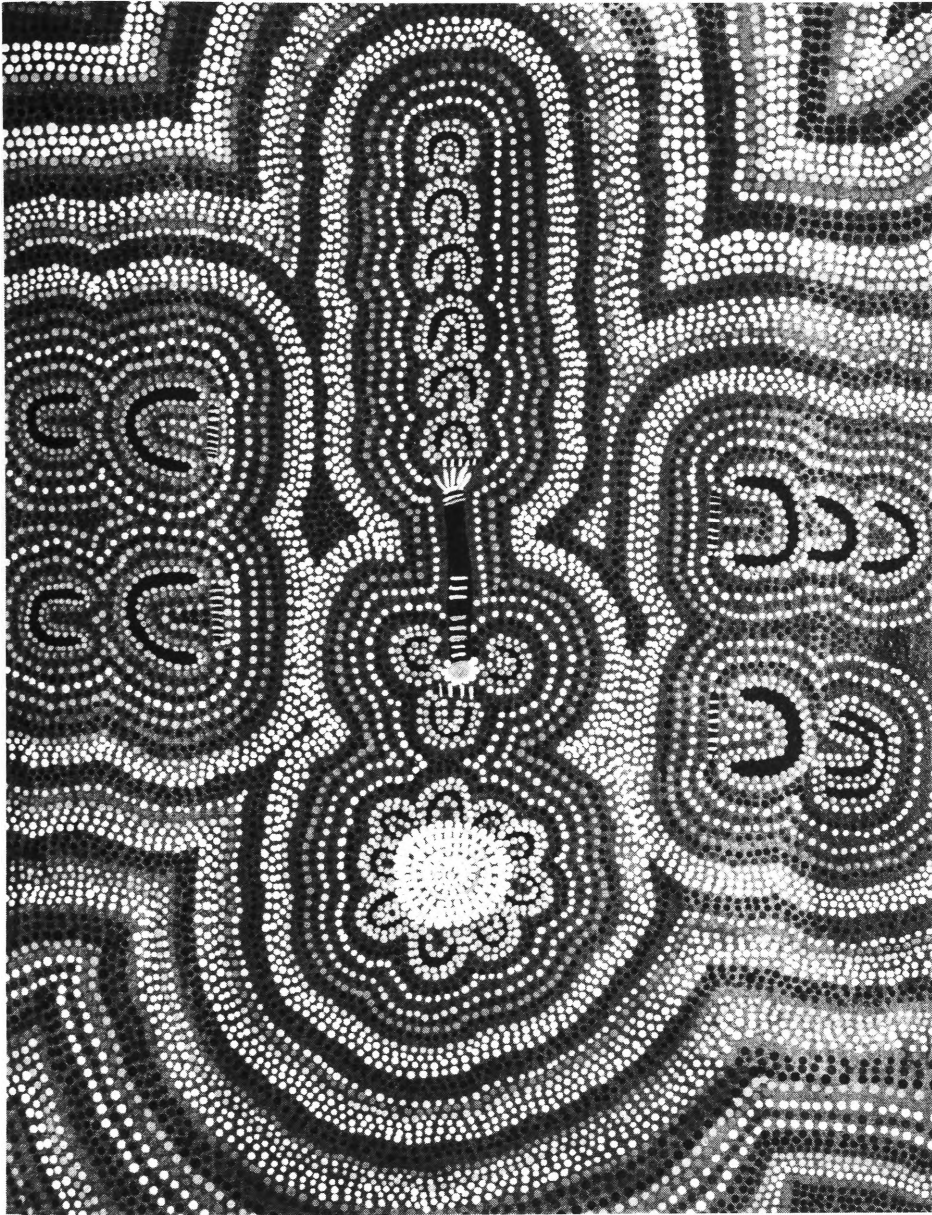


8. Above left: Ron Hurley (working in Queensland) Untitled stoneware sculpture 1985. 475 x 340 mm (collection Flinders University Art Museum). Thancoupie (Thanaquith/ Napperanum, working at Weipa, Queensland). Stoneware plate (above right) 350 x 330 mm (Private collection); three stoneware knee pots (below left) and stoneware egg incised with animal shapes (collection Flinders University Art Museum).

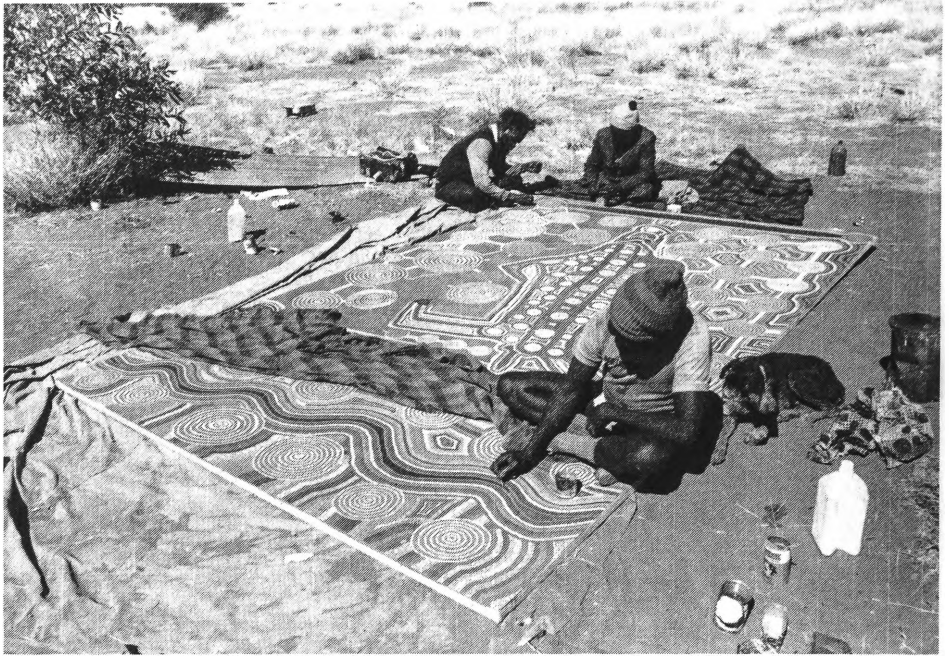


9. Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa (Anmatjera/Aranda; Papunya, Northern Territory). Acrylic paint on board 1971. 901 x 915 mm. This is believed to be one of the first six of the Papunya paintings to be offered for sale. The design elements include two bull-roarers, two snakes, two ceremonial poles growing out of ground paintings and a series of kangaroo tracks along the bottom (Private collection).





10. Maringka Nangala (Pintupi; Kintore, Northern Territory). Women's Ceremony 1984. Acrylic on canvas 798 x 550 mm. This depicts a women's ceremony forbidden to men. In the centre is a *nulla-nulla* or fighting club. U-shapes represent singing and dancing women. This painting shows the increasing use of dotting in Papunya painting (collection Flinders University Art Museum).



11. An acrylic painting being produced on the ground, as is usual, at papunya West Camp, Northern Territory in 1981. Pintupi artists, left to right, John Tjakamarra, Uta Uta Tjangala, and (foreground) Yala Yala 'Gibbs' Tjungarrayi. Tjangala is the 'owner' of the *pankalanka* (ogre) story depicted here.

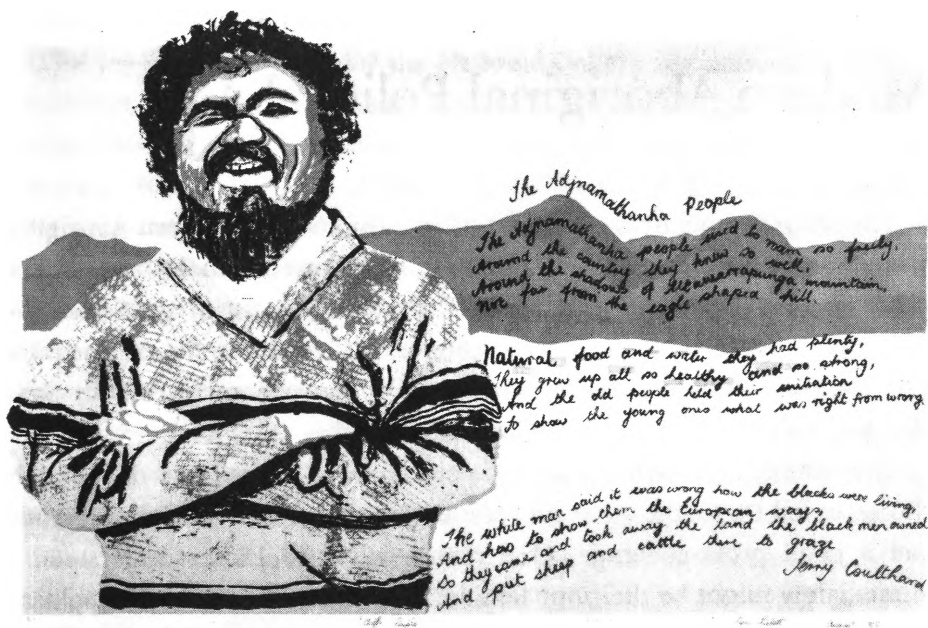




12. Trevor Nickolls (b. Port Adelaide; working in Melbourne) Untitled 1982. Acrylic on canvas 510 x 764 mm. This painting shows clear reference to the iconography and dotting technique of Central Desert painting (collection Flinders University Art Museum).



13. Sally Morgan (b. and living in Perth, Western Australia) *Citizenship* 1987. Screenprint on paper 570 x 565 mm (collection Flinders University Art Museum).



- 14 Byron Pickett (b. and working in Western Australia). Cliff's People – Adjamathanha People. Silkscreen on paper 464 x 713 mm, August 1985. The portrait is of Cliff Coulthard, then working in the Aboriginal Heritage Section of the S.A. Department of Environment and Planning, the words by Terry Coulthard (collection Flinders University Art Museum).

#### NOTE:

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